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C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 002944

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: APRIL 29 BARNIER-AOUN MEETING

REF: A. STATE 78006

[1](#)B. PARIS 2162

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This message contains an action request for Washington in para 5.

[1](#)2. (C) During an April 29 meeting with visiting NEA DAS Elizabeth Dibble, MFA A/S-equivalent for North Africa/Middle East Jean-Francois Thibault offered a brief readout of FM Barnier's meeting earlier that day with former Lebanese Armed Forces Commander General Michel Aoun. Thibault said Barnier stressed the need for Aoun to put his personal ambitions aside and work to support the common goals and unity of the opposition. Barnier also emphasized that Syria was looking to complicate the situation in Lebanon and that Aoun's return gave an opportunity to the pro-Syrian loyalists; Aoun had to be careful to avoid being used by Syria or its supporters. Aoun responded that he was a uniter, not a divider, and that while he had been approached by the Syrians, he would never give them anything or allow himself to be manipulated.

[1](#)3. (C) Thibault commented that Aoun appeared old and somewhat out of touch with current realities in Lebanon, viewing himself as a "Lebanese de Gaulle." The GoF was unsure as to Aoun's real influence or power base in Lebanon, but considered it weakened since his departure into exile from Lebanon 15 years ago. Most of the young Lebanese assembling on Martyr's Square, for instance, were too young to remember Aoun as a political force in Lebanon. Thibault noted that Aoun's staff had told him, on the margins of the Barnier meeting, that Aoun had a following among young people in Lebanon, and they claimed that Aounists had prevailed in recent elections in Lebanese universities. Thibault was skeptical of the claim, and opined that if true, it was likely limited to a few, but not most, universities in Lebanon.

[1](#)4. (C) In a conversation with poloff April 28, MFA DAS-equivalent for the Levant Christian Jouret described the Barnier decision to meet with Aoun as resulting from Aoun's repeated requests for a meeting with President Chirac, which the GoF had turned down, citing French neutrality. He said Aoun found that explanation unconvincing, and cited Chirac's prior meetings with Walid Jumblatt, Patriarch Sfeir, and Sa'd Hariri. Jouret said Aoun was not enthusiastic about meeting Barnier, since everyone knew French Lebanon policy was being made at the Elysee. The GoF wanted to keep the meeting discreet and insisted on having no journalists, photographers, or press statements as a condition of the meeting taking place. Jouret summed up that the GoF decided that it was only right to say farewell to Aoun after France saved his life, he spent 15 years here, and he fought Syria for so long. In short, Aoun was not the GoF's enemy, although the GoF remained concerned about the potential for his return to undermine opposition unity.

[1](#)5. (C) Action request: Aoun's staff here in Paris contacted us recently to suggest another meeting with Aoun before his planned May 7 departure. We believe it could be useful to doubletrack the French message of moderation and the need to maintain opposition unity with Aoun before his arrival in Beirut. We would appreciate guidance from Washington on whether to seek another meeting with Aoun, and, if so, talking points for the discussion. End action request.

ROSENBLATT